

could please have a ride for her clothespins and laundry right for her car.

When we got to the hospital, nurses put me on a stretcher. They talked in loud, worried whispers while they cut off what was left of my fancy pink dress with a pair of shiny scissors. Then they picked me up, laid me flat on a big metal bed piled with ice cubes, and spread some of the ice over my body. A doctor with silver hair and black-rimmed glasses led my mother out of the room. As they left, I heard him telling her that it was very serious. The nurses remained behind, hovering over me. I could tell I was causing a big fuss, and I stayed quiet. One of them squeezed my hand and told me I was going to be okay.

"I know," I said, "but if I'm not, that's okay, too."

The nurse squeezed my hand again and bit her lower lip.

The room was small and white, with bright lights and metal cabinets. I stared for a while at the rows of tiny dots in the ceiling panels. Ice cubes covered my stomach and ribs and pressed up against my cheeks. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small, grimy hand reach up a few inches from my face and grab a handful of cubes. I heard a loud crunching sound and looked down. It was Brian, eating the ice.

The doctors said I was lucky to be alive. They took patches of skin from my upper thigh and put them over the most badly burned parts of my stomach, ribs, and chest. They said it was called a skin graft. When they were finished, they wrapped my entire right side in bandages.

"Look, I'm a half-mummy," I said to one of the nurses. She smiled and put my right arm in a sling and attached it to the headboard so I couldn't move it.

The nurses and doctors kept asking me questions: How did you get burned? Have your parents ever hurt you? Why do you have all these bruises and cuts? My parents never hurt me, I said. I got the cuts and bruises playing outside and the burns from cooking hot dogs. They asked what I was doing cooking hot dogs by myself at the age of three. It was easy, I said. You just put the hot dogs in the water and boil them. It wasn't

like there was some complicated recipe that you had to follow. The pan was too heavy for me to lift when it was full. I'd put a chair next to the sink, climb up and fill a glass pan with water. I'd pour the water into the pan. I'd boil it over again until the pan held enough water. Then I'd turn it off and when the water was boiling, I'd drop in the hot dogs. "I'm a little mature for my age," I told them, "and she lets me cook."

Two nurses looked at each other, and one of them wrote something down on a clipboard. I asked what was wrong. Nothing.

Every couple of days, the nurses changed the bandages. They took the used bandage off to the side, wadded and covered it with another bandage, a big gauzy cloth, to the burns. At night, I'd lie on my left hand over the rough, scabby surface of the skin that was under the bandage. Sometimes I'd peel off scabs. The nurses would stop me, but I couldn't resist pulling on them real slow to see if they could get loose. Once I had a couple of them free, I'd talk to each other in cheeping voices.

The hospital was clean and shiny. Everything was white. The beds and sheets and nurses' uniforms—or silver—the beds and medical instruments. Everyone spoke in polite, calm voices. In a hushed you could hear the nurses' rubber-soled shoes clicking the way down the hall. I wasn't used to quiet and order, and I liked it.

I also liked it that I had my own room, since in the hospital I was with my brother and my sister. My hospital room even had a television set up on the wall. We didn't have a TV at home, but I watched it a lot. Red Buttons and Lucille Ball were my favorite.

The nurses and doctors always asked how I was feeling. Were I hungry or needed anything. The nurses brought me food three times a day, with fruit cocktail or Jell-O for dessert. They changed sheets even if they still looked clean. Sometimes I read books. They told me I was very smart and could read as well as a student.

One day a nurse with wavy yellow hair and blue eyes was chewing on something. I asked her what it was, and